

FORT LAUDERDALE— The finale of a church's "Faith, Freedom and Fireworks" celebration on Sunday had the feel of a political convention, with indoor fireworks and a choir belting out "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" as red, white and blue confetti filled the air.

And providing the patriotic speech at the First Baptist Church of Fort Lauderdale was U.S. Rep. Allen West, R-Plantation, who hinted at a run for his party's vice presidential candidacy in 2012.

"Why not," West replied. He added, to the cheers of the crowd, "You all got it on camera."

Thompson also worked in a bit of "This is Your Life" for West, a retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel.

The pastor arranged for an appearance by former Army Sgt. Robert Delgado, of Houston, who served under West's command in Iraq. Delgado credits West with saving his life by sacrificing his own body armor.

"I wouldn't be here today" if West hadn't handed over the armor, said Delgado, who said he was shot a month later, "right in the chest."

The appearance of Delgado, who had made a TV commercial for West during his congressional campaign, seemed to surprise and delight the congressman.

Most of Sunday's ceremony was dedicated to veterans. It started with high school students lining a block of Northeast Second Street with dozens of flags. Actors dressed like soldiers rappelled from the church ceiling. The Liberty Voices choir, visiting from Disney World, turned the sanctuary into a patriotic music hall.

Thompson spoke about veterans' sacrifice during his sermon. "Greater love hath no man than this, than one that lay down his life for one's friend," he said, quoting John 15:13.

The pastor did not shy away from politics. "Godliness makes a nation great," he said, quoting Proverbs.

He compared the black Floridians who took part in the wade-ins that desegregated Fort Lauderdale beach 50 years ago to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and India's Mahatma Gandhi.

In an interview after the ceremony, West blasted President Barack Obama for announcing a troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. West spent the last week of June visiting troops on the ground in the war-torn country.

"I think [the announcement] has had a terrible psychological effect over there, and I don't think that's something we should have been focused on. We should have been focused on what the conditions on the ground are and the improvements that we're making," he said.

West also took a moment to remember the casualties.

"I just recently got some more hits on my BlackBerry about some losses that we've suffered over there. As a matter of fact, while I was there, we have a young Marine sergeant, from Oakland Park, Florida, [killed] who will be coming home this Wednesday," he said.

The Department of Defense said in a statement on Monday that Sgt. Marlon E. Myrie, 25, was killed during combat in the hotly contested Helmand Province.

"So when I see what happened today and this theme of sacrifice and liberty and freedom," West said, "that's what they're doing for us to be able to have this great celebration."

For full story, including a video of Congressman West's "Faith, Freedom and Fireworks," speech, [click here](#)